# A Relational Frame Theory Account of Empathy

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Abstract

The current paper proposes a Relational Frame Theory (RFT, Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Roche, 2001a) conceptualization of empathy and perspective taking that follows previous literature outlining a relationship between those phenomena and general functioning. Deictic framing, a relational operant investigated by RFT researchers, constitutes the behavioral core of perspective taking and empathic concern towards other individuals. Given (a) the recent evidence supporting the importance of deictic framing in the areas of child development and autism and (b) the reported success of several studies in implementing perspective-taking procedures, it is reasonable to conclude that deictic framing is a psychological process that can play an important role in the development of new interventions that can be extended to the adult population and to other human phenomena, such as social coordination, helping behaviors, stigma/prejudice reduction, and clinical problems.
Keywords: empathy, deictic framing, perspective taking, RFT, contextual behavioral science, relational responding, social coordination, helping behaviors, clinical problems.

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The term empathy comes from the Greek "empatheia" which is a composite of the words "en" and "pathos", and translates into "being in some sort of suffering, feeling or emotion". This term was incorporated to western culture by the Germans at the beginning of the 20th century in the context of theories of art appreciation, and it became used in psychology by Titchener as a form of pespective-taking that referred to the psychological process of objectively perceiving another person's situation.

The current literature on empathy has evolved after that original conceptualization. As discussed by Batson (1991, p. 87), although Titchener originally conceptualized empathy in its cognitive dimension, research during the 60s and 70s emphasized its emotional side, with perspective-taking as a precursor of that ability. Empathy as a result came to have an important emotional component and it was defined as a set of congruent vicarious emotions that were other-oriented and barely distinguishable from pity, compassion and tenderness.

In contrast with that social emphasis, other authors proposed that when those emotions are oriented towards reducing someone else's suffering those should be called sympathy, and empathy should be simply defined as "an affective response that stems from the apprehension or comprehension of another's emotional state or condition and is similar to what the other person is feeling or would be expected to feel" (Eisenberg, 2000, p.671). For these authors, pure empathy turns into sympathy or personal distress after some "cognitive processing" where the individual learns to differentiate between his own emotional states and those of others.

A third main approach to empathy conceptualizes it as a multidimensional phenomenon, resolving the dispute by integrating the cognitive and the emotional dimensions of empathy and arguing that empathy is a composite of perspective-taking, fantasy orientation, empathic concern and personal distress (Davis, 1983). Fantasy orientation is the individuals' tendency to identify with fictitious characters, empathic concern refers to the feelings of sympathy and concern for others, and personal distress to the feelings of anxiety and difficulty in interpersonal settings.

Nonetheless, there seems to be a strong consensus about the relationships between those psychological processes and other important areas of functioning. For example, it has been reported that those processes are strongly related to general well functioning (Eisenberg, 2000, p.672), pro-social behaviors (Underwood & Moore, 1982; Batson, 2002; Scaffidi-Abbate, Isgro, Wicklund, & Boca, 2006b),

conflict resolution (Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000; Drolet, Larrick, & Morris, 1998), and marital adjustment (Long, 1993), whereas a lack of them has been observed in autism and mental retardation (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985; Charlop-Christy & Daneshvar, 2003; Blacher-Dixon & Simeonsson, 1981), and in some psychological disorders (Imura, 2002; Rupp & Jurkovic, 1996; Schiffman et al., 2004; Wells, Clark, & Ahmad, 1998).

The evidence seems to indicate not only that a lack of emotional and cognitive perspective taking skills is associated with the development of those problems, but that when we manipulate or try to change this ability, children become more intelligent, understanding, productive, capable of solving problems and less impulsive (Saltz, Dixon, & Johnson, 1977; Rosen, 1974). Perspective taking has also shown to reduce delinquency (Chandler, 1973), group conflicts (Corcoran et al., 2000) and stigma (Galinsky & Ku, 2004).

However, as stated by Eisenberg, "empirical work in the field is starting to move from attention to mere correlation to concern about moderating influences, mediational processes, and the direction of causality between morally relevant variables and emotionality and regulation" (2000, p.688). What seems to be missing from the literature on empathy is precisely what contextual behavioral scientists would be eager to provide, which are principles of change that provide philosophical clarity, theory and data (Vilardaga, Levin, & Hayes, 2007) and a broader range of methodologies to explore psychological events (e.g., basic laboratory research, analog studies or randomized controlled trials) with the aim of producing rules of generalization with increasing levels of precision, scope and depth (Vilardaga, Hayes, Levin, & Muto, 2008). Such an approach and the basic account provided by Relational Frame Theory (RFT, Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Roche, 2001b) has guided the writing of this paper.

RFT is a contextual behavioral account of language and cognition that incorporates the body of research from behavior analysis and focuses on complex human phenomena. The core of this behavioral theory is that relating is an operant that emerges after a particular history of reinforcement (Berens & Hayes, 2007).

Early research on relational responding and stimulus equivalence showed that this behavioral process has two additional properties which are mutual and combinatorial entailment. Mutual entailment is exemplified by the fact that in the same way that an individual will be able to respond by saying the word "house" in the presence of a house, he would most likely be able to imagine a house when hearing the word "house". In the same way, combinatorial entailment is the phenomenon that occurs when an individual learns that a house is bigger than a condo and a condo bigger than a studio, and then he derives that a house is bigger than a studio without further instruction.

Those properties of relational responding have innumerable benefits for the human species. It allows organisms to better adjust to their environments, because language itself becomes an additional part of the environment that increases the scope of the organism's interactions with it. When organisms respond not only to external events but also to verbal stimuli, the possibilities of manipulating and changing the world are largely increased, and by virtue of this process, the functions of its objects are amplified. For example, individuals can learn to respond to the words "it's hot today" in ways that will prevent feeling that sensation. Those words become a social/verbal context that brings to bear a set of responses by part of the organism that allows certain consequences to happen.

One of the most interesting additions of RFT goes beyond responding to the formal properties of the objects of the world. Human beings have been considered "social by nature", but what this point highlights is that it is not only important to manipulate and control static objects that we can compare and classify, we also need to learn to control and influence other verbal organisms for the purposes of survival. This aspect of the environment is extremely important. It determines our success as a species,

and this is probably why many different notions of empathy and perspective-taking have received such a large amount of attention in the psychological literature.

From this point of view, the RFT account of perspective taking and empathy resolves some of the problems observed in the psychological literature since it provides a theoretical and functional description of that phenomenon that explains some of the outcomes to which it has been related.

## Deictic Framing and Empathy

In order to understand the RFT conceptualization of empathy, it is necessary to describe other aspects of this theory. In addition to mutual and combinatorial entailment RFT investigators have proposed the use of different terms to refer to different kinds of relational responding. They have argued that we can talk about different types of relational operants, such as coordination framing, hierarchical framing and comparison framing. Our RFT account of empathy starts with the description of one of those relational operants, deictic framing (Hayes, 1984).

Deictic framing is a relational operant that allows distinctions between I-YOU, HERE-THERE and NOW-THEN. The emergence of deictic framing does not depend upon the abstraction of the properties of the objects (such as "more than" or "less than"), instead, is the result of the abstraction of the perspective of the speaker. To understand someone's distinction between "I" and "YOU", one needs to know who the speaker is. Imagine there are two people in a room. There is a telephone call and both individuals provide the following contextual cue at the same time: "Will that call be for *you* or for *me*?". The words "you" and "me" will be topographically identical for both individuals, but responding effectively to that question will require taking each other's perspective, otherwise the interaction would be incomprehensible. The same applies to understanding NOW-THEN and HERE-THERE contextual cues, since a speaker's perspective is necessary to make sense of them.

The emergence of deictic framing is a core behavioral process that starts at an early age. Research has shown that a particular history of reinforcement that prompts for deictic discriminations would be necessary for the discrimination of a sense of I-YOU and that this ability can be trained (Weil, 2007). This operant is present in normal adults (McHugh, Barnes-Holmes, & Barnes-Holmes, 2004), and it goes from simple statements such as "this toy is mine" to more complex verbal contexts such as understanding the different characters of a story. For that reason it can be argued that deictic framing enhances people's coordination of their social behavior, and as a matter of fact, deficits in deictic framing have been found in children with autism and developmental disorders (Rehfeldt, Dillen, Ziomek, & Kowalchuk, 2007), which points out to the idea that a lack of deictic framing may be linked to poor social skills. Deictic framing would allow a transformation of stimulus functions in the listener as a result of statements such as "How would you feel if you were me?" If sadness is experienced by that speaker, the listener can respond in ways that would both reduce the sadness experienced by the speaker and the sadness evoked by that question in himself. But that relational process and its associated functions could never take place without a deictic framing repertoire in the first place.

However, arguing that deictic framing allows individuals to supply reinforcement to each other effectively and enforce social coordination does not fully explore the extent of this phenomenon. People behave towards each other in multiple ways, but they also behave with regards their own behavior and they do so in a special way. From an RFT point of view an human organism is "not simply behaving with regard to his behavior, but is also behaving *verbally* with regard to his behavior" (Hayes & Wilson, 1993, p. 297). When applied to our topic this means that people behave verbally towards their own experiences, such as judgments, evaluations or emotional interpersonal reactions.

The question remains about what is the behavioral process by means of which individuals interact more effectively with their own private reactions towards each other. Following Skinner's account (Skinner, 1974), RFT researchers have proposed that "If I ask many, many questions of a person, the only thing that will be consistent is not the content of the answer, but the context from which the answer occurs. 'I, HERE, NOW,' is the self that is left behind when all of the content differences are subtracted out." (Barnes-Holmes, Hayes, & Dymond, 2001a, p.129). Following that rationale, the discrimination of an invariant "I" that is the result of a history of deictic framing reduces the dominance of the derived transformations of functions of particular thoughts and feelings about others. For example, the thought that a person that I know "is miserable" is a particular relational discrimination that brings to bear a set of aversive functions, such as feelings of rejection, disgust, etc. However, after a sufficient history of prompts that would allow me to discriminate that there is always "an ever-present division between the speaker (always HERE and NOW) and the spoken about (always THERE and THEN)" (Barnes-Holmes, Stewart, Dymond, & Roche, 2000, p.64), a process of discrimination would occur that would allow me to see that this particular thought is just a relational response that has arisen after a particular history of interactions with that individual. Furthermore, I would become aware that there is a distinction between who another individual really is (in behavioral terms a locus or perspective: YOU-THERE-THEN) and my thoughts, feelings or relational responses about him/her.

This sense of division between the speaker and the spoken about is central in the RFT conceptualization of empathic concern and it constitutes a particular instance of the construction of the verbal other (Barnes-Holmes, Hayes, & Dymond, 2001b). Behavior under such circumstances operates under better contextual control and this sense of "I-YOU as perspective" integrates the discriminative functions evoked by others, a larger set of social contingencies can be contacted, and the social behavioral repertoire of the individual becomes more flexible. In addition, this process does not imply that the aversive functions of a history of contact with a particular individual will be omitted; the individual instead is responding as a result of a more inclusive set of discriminations that provide more flexibility (or sensitivity) to what is really possible in the interactions with this particular organism. This self-relational-perspective-taking is the opposite to the blurring effect of the dominance of particular thoughts and judgments, and self-awareness studies seem to confirm that this is the case (e.g., Scaffidi-Abbate, Isgro, Wicklund, & Boca, 2006a).

This would also explain why when the experience of an individual is under the contextual control of a sense of "I-YOU as invariant," his activity is socially more organized and effective. The correlations between empathy, general functioning, social cohesion, conflict resolution and altruistic behaviors reported at the beginning of this paper can be explained through this behavioral process. In addition, other natural phenomena, such as what has been referred as spirituality and mindfulness practices, could be accounted by the integrated sense of permanence and unity of an "I-YOU as invariant" (Hayes, 1984; Barnes-Holmes, Hayes, & Gregg, 2001; Vilardaga, Yadavaia, Levin, Hayes, & Harper, 2007).

In summary, deictic framing, as an operant, allows individuals to coordinate their behavior and make sense of the meaning of other individual's statements, which is crucial for social interactions at the most basic level. Likewise, individuals who have been prompted by their social/verbal community to achieve a sense of "I-YOU as invariant" are more likely to discriminate their own discriminations about themselves and others without being necessarily under their control. In addition, RFT suggests that given the formation of an "I-YOU as invariant", individuals will experience more satisfactory psychological well being and more healthy social relations due to the fact that they will be more likely to respond effectively to other individuals and themselves in ways that take into account a larger set of relational discriminations, and that will result in a broadening of their repertoire.

## Conclusions

As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the empathy literature has outlined several approaches for how to conceptualize this phenomenon, however, the body of research that has investigated empathy has utilized a narrow methodological strategy (mostly cross-sectional research), which has resulted in a weak approach to the contextual analysis of empathy and therefore in a lack of emphasis in the development of actual principles of change that would lead to more useful scientific findings.

In this paper we have argued that previous developments in RFT and deictic framing have opened the path for (a) a conceptualization of the emergence of feelings of empathy among individuals (b) a theoretical link between empathy and actual indicators of well being, and (c) a principle based approach to the manipulation of specific components of the social/verbal community that would enhance those processes.

One of the main features of RFT and Contextual Behavioral Science at large are its aim of producing rules of generalization with increasing levels of precision, scope and depth (Vilardaga et al., in press). Further research is needed to show that deictic framing is actually linked to empathy and psychological well being but in this paper I have attempted to show that this theoretical model might constitute an integrative account of the observations described in the larger literature and a useful path to further explore it.

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